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PRAGMATISM AND KNOWLEDGE

GEORGE BURMAN FOSTER
The University of Chicago

Time was when both science and religion claimed to know things, and when both knowledges enjoyed equal indubitable validity. Subsequently there arose a division of labor, a compact according to which science knew one set of things and religion another. An unhappy period then ensued in which science denied the availability of religious knowledge in the sphere of science, and doubted its validity, certainly its verifiableness, even in the region of religion. Henceforth only symbolic significance was to be accorded to religious ideas. Now the function of a symbol is not to report the reality and nature of an object, but to express the feelings of a subject. Thus religion ceases to know things, since cognitive capacity is denied to its system of ideas. In my opinion, the most serious question of the hour is whether religion stands or falls with the affirmation or denial of cognitive function to the ideas which faith possesses. So far it does not appear that religion, as it has been hitherto understood, can endure the negation of the cognitive function and the capability of its ideas. But the interesting point in the present situation is that science, which once urged, then allowed, finally denied, the cognitive function of religious ideas, now disclaims such function for her own ideas and concepts and formulae. "Why do you find fault with me any longer for my attitude to your knowledge, declining to avail myself of it, or to admit your right to do so, since I assume the same attitude to my own knowledge? If you do not know your reality neither do I mine," says Science to Religion. A chemist of note has recently said that he would as little think of calling a chemical formula "true," as he would of calling it "blue." He also indicates that he would occupy the same position with reference to all the so-called "laws" of which science speaks. Formula and law alike are devices for the manipulation of phenomena and the achievement of practical results—in a word, for orientation of the self in the world of phenom-

ena, and not for the intellectual apprehension of reality. Scientific facts, and, even more so, laws, are *artificial* creations of the scholar. Therefore, science can teach us no sort of truth. It can only serve us as instrument and guide in our conduct.

It is evident, therefore, that, from the standpoint of this pragmatic epistemology, the philosophy and apologetics of religion must do their work all over again. Either they must show that religion does not need to know things, or they must undertake the novel task of compelling science to assume a cognitive function; for if science is going to practice such cognitive asceticism and self-effacement religion must abandon her cognitive indulgence and assertiveness. If these things are done in the green tree, what shall be done in the dry? A genial man once said: "If my wife does not do what she wants to, I make her!" This is what must be done to science, or else religion must abdicate the cognitive function too.

But for the present let us see if we can understand a little further this new tack in the ever-troubled ocean of thought.

It is evident that the philosophic theory above confessed comes under the head of what the late Middle Ages called Nominalism. As such, the theory is not wholly false. One must render to this philosophic Caesar the things that are Caesar's, but one must not allow it to transcend its own kingdom, and claim the things that are God's.

But the doctrine in question is not simply Nominalistic. Its main feature is its anti-intellectualism. There is reality only in our changing and fleeting impressions, and even this reality vanishes as soon as one touches it.

And yet it is not skepticism. If our philosopher holds that the understanding is immutably impotent, it is but to accord a larger place to other sources of knowledge—to the heart, for example, to the feeling, to instinct, or to "faith."

Admitting the talent of our new philosophers, the acuteness of their theory, the cogency and importance of their protest against the primacy and tyranny of the intellect, there yet seem to me to be some reasons why we cannot entirely agree with them.

They complain because they are so frequently held to be skeptics. It cannot well be otherwise, although this charge is probably not justified. Appearances are against them. They are Nominalists

as to doctrine, realists as to heart, and they can escape absolute Nominalism only by a desperate effort of faith. Does not an anti-intellectualistic philosophy condemn itself to being incommunicable, untransferable? Is it not an essentially "inner" philosophy—or, at least, is not that which is transferable only the negative judgment? If this be so, it is not surprising that the philosophy looks very like skepticism to the "innocent bystander."

Here, it would seem, is the weak point of this philosophy: if it remains consistent with itself, it exhausts its total energy in a negation and an ejaculation of ecstasy. As a maximum of achievement, every philosopher can repeat this negation and this ejaculation, and *change its form without adding anything thereto*.

In which case, would it not be more consistent to keep still? Big books are written. To this end one must still employ words. Is not one much more "discursive," "dialectic," in this way, much more "abstract," and consequently so much the farther removed from "life" and "reality" than the animal who lives quite simply, without philosophizing? Is not the animal the true philosopher? It is most "concrete" and zoölogical, if not "biological."

From the fact that no painter ever painted a portrait that was a "perfect likeness," may we conclude that the best painter is the painter that does not paint at all? If a zoölogist dissects an animal, he thereby changes it of course; dissecting it, he is thereby condemned to only partial knowledge of it. But if he did not dissect it at all he would be condemned to much less knowledge and, consequently, presumably to much less talk!

Certainly there are other powers and functions in man than the understanding. No one was ever so foolish as to deny that. Those other powers are active. The philosopher must speak of them. To this end he must know at least some part of the little that one can know of them; he must therefore observe their activity. But how? With what eyes, if not with the eyes of his understanding? The heart, the instinct, can guide and determine the understanding, but cannot make it superfluous; it can direct the look, but not displace the eyes. One may say—I am among those who do say—that the "will" is the toiler and the "intellect" the tool of the toil, although the word "tool" is not quite happy. But evermore the intellect is an

instrument which, if it can be dispensed with in action (conduct), *is nevertheless indispensable in philosophizing*. Therefore a really anti-intellectualistic philosophy is impossible. Perhaps we must conclude to the superiority of activity—I do so conclude—even so, it is the understanding which so concludes. This, too, is a superiority not to be despised.

Science is only a rule of action, a device for getting results for life—this is Pragmatism. We are not capable of *knowing* anything, and yet we are implicated in life; we establish rules of action; the totality of these rules we call science.

Equally so, men have established regulations for their pleasure, regulations which, with even more right than science, can claim universal assent. So, too, compelled to choose, yet not in a position to choose, you flip a penny to decide this way or that. The rule of backgammon or whist is of course a rule of action, like science from the pragmatic point of view. But is there no difference? The rules of gaming are *arbitrary* agreements; and if agreements just the opposite of those that were made had been made, conceivably the rules would not have been less “good” (=useful). *Science* is a rule of action with a result—at least in most cases—*while the opposite rule would have had no result*. The opposite of H_2SO_4 would do just as well as a rule of some game; but not as a rule of conduct where the reality thus signalized is involved. If a chemist says that to produce hydrogen he must let an acid act upon zinc, he states a rule which has a result. He could have said: Let filtered water act upon gold; but it would have had no result.

If, therefore, scientific recipes have value as rules of action, that value consists in our knowing that they are resultful, at least in general. But to know this is already to know *something*. How, then, can one say that we know nothing? Science forecasts, and on that account alone can be “useful” and serve as a rule of action. Of course, this forecasting is often refuted by the result. But this proves that science is imperfect; and if I add that science will always remain imperfect, I am sure that *this* is a forecast which never can be refuted. Does the scientist err less frequently than the prophet? Progress is slow but steady, so that scholars, though they become bolder, are ever less frequently befooled. This is little, but it is something.

The errancy of science is often supposed to be proved by an appeal to the changes which science makes in method and conclusion. No conclusion stands, no conclusion true, no truth—that is the *descensus Averni*. Some victory, but mostly defeat: science is resultless thus.

But if science were resultless, it could not serve as rule of action. Whence its worth then? In our experiencing it? That is, in our loving it and believing in it? Alchemists had recipes for making gold; they loved the recipes and had faith in them. Yet our recipes are better because they have results, though our “faith” is less lively.

There is no way to escape the following dilemma: *either*, science is not competent to forecast—but in that case it is worthless as a rule of action; *or*, it is competent to forecast, in a more or less imperfect manner—but in that case it is not worthless as a means of *knowledge*.

I even doubt if it is “true” (we do sometimes have to use that word still) to say that action is the sole and exclusive goal of science. May we turn down all studies concerning Sirius, because it is objected that we shall probably never exercise any influence upon this star? In (pure) mathematics is not knowledge the goal and action the means? Did Copernicanism spring from a sense of practical need only, or rather from cognitive curiosity also? Has the age-long idea of the love of knowledge partly for its own sake been all wrong? Is the love of art for its own sake—or of one’s wife for her own sake—immoral? If we do indeed rejoice in science in developing industry, is not this joy partly due to the fact that such service strengthens the scholar’s faith in himself? As a matter of fact, functional psychology implies that the mind is an organism; but, since in an organism nothing is *mere* means and not also end, the knowledge function cannot be degraded to a mere menial in the economy of the soul, but must be accorded dignity and worth on its own account. Pragmatism may not be allowed to substitute its new Absolute of Utility for the old Absolute of Knowledge. We must have democracy within the psychic as well as within the social. Unlike either Absolute, pluralism must be confraternal.

Turning to another item our philosopher says, *science makes the facts*. It may be that he means that science creates the *scientific* facts, not the *raw* facts. This is a good distinction, at all events. But

to draw it accurately—there is the rub. Yet the idea of pragmatism is that raw facts are not scientific, are outside of science.

Is it true that science—the scientist—*freely creates* the scientific facts, while the raw facts are a donation to him? Atom is a scientific fact, we are told. Is the atom a sample of a *fact*? There cannot be science without scientific fact, nor scientific fact without raw fact. Scientific fact is but a translation, so to speak, of raw fact. Does the scientist create scientific fact? Even so, *not out of nothing*, but out of raw fact. Therefore he does not do it *freely*, his freedom being conditioned and limited by the properties of the material with which he works. An eclipse at nine o'clock will not wait till ten at the behest of the will of the creative astronomer. Indeed, there is no sharp distinction between raw and scientific fact—*only*, the expression of one fact is more raw or more scientific than of another. But if there are raw facts, then the relations between them and the laws of this relationship are not the total creations of the scientist for utilitarian ends. In a less degree indeed, the same remark may be made concerning relations and laws of scientific facts. They are realities in existence, that is, *true*, and not simply devices of the pragmatist to serve as supernumeraries in the serio-comic play of human life. And, as to the world of religion, let any functional psychologist try to act upon the idea of God, no matter how it arose, and at the same time disbelieve in his existence; he will find that no action will follow, if *ontological* reference be denied to the idea.

After all, the total humanization of reality is an audacious and unwarrantable proposition. The whole race of us men, from the beginning until now, living and dead, could be comfortably congregated in the state of New York. We are but an episode, the whole posse of us, in the transitory life of an insignificant planet, a grain of sand, as it were, on the shore of the infinite sea. This modern anthropocentric Humanism and Copernicanism are mutually exclusive. It may well be that the statement of the Whole Reality in terms of the human is not a tribute to Its wealth and strength, but an insinuation of Its poverty and weakness. It may well be that there are more things in heaven and earth than we dream of in our new philosophy.